Graduates' Degree of Satisfaction with the MA Program in Teaching English as Foreign Language at the University of Costa Rica

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza el grado de satisfacción de 41 graduados del programa de Maestría en la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Este estudio concluye que ellos están sumamente satisfechos con los conocimientos adquiridos en ese posgrado; sin embargo, se presentan algunas sugerencias para mejorarlo y así satisfacer las demandas de nuestra sociedad con respecto a la enseñanza del inglés en forma más efectiva.

Palabras claves: evaluación de programas, grado de satisfacción de los estudiantes, currículo, programa de posgrado, enseñanza del inglés, aprendizaje.

Abstract

This article analyzes the degree of satisfaction with the Master's Program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language of 41 graduates. This study concludes that they are highly satisfied with the knowledge gained in the program. Moreover, this article provides insight as to possible changes needed to successfully meet the demands of the country for English language teaching.

Key words: program evaluation, students' degree of satisfaction, curriculum, graduate studies, English teaching, learning.

The rapid changes in our society, in technology, and in communication affect our lives, and as members of this society, we often exhibit some degree of uncertainty and confusion as a consequence of these everyday changes. Curriculum is a field of study that results from social activity, and thus it is not surprising that curriculum also presents some of these characteristics and that its study appears confusing or even elusive on certain occasions. Therefore, curriculum evaluation should aim at increasing our understanding of all our academic activities rather than at finding precise answers. Since curriculum has proven very dynamic, stating a clear and concise definition has always been a challenge. Ornstein and Hunkins (1998) present two definitions. The first one is specific and prescriptive: "Curriculum

is a plan for action or a written document that includes strategies for achieving desired goals or ends." The second one is broader: "Curriculum deals with the experiences of the learner." (p.10) Another definition given by White, Martin, Stimson and Hodge (2001) states that "a curriculum covers not only the content but also the goals of the teaching programme as well as the activities which will form part of the learning experiences for a given group of students; the matching up of outcomes with objectives involves evaluation." (p.169)

Several authors have defined the term *evaluation*. Lynch (1996: 2) describes it as "the systematic attempt to gather information in order to make judgements or decisions. Evaluation can make use of assessment instruments, but it is not limited to such forms of information gathering. It may include, for example, the use of unstructured interviews." In this specific study, a survey is used to measure the degree of satisfaction of graduates in a master's program. Brown (1995:24) also defines *evaluation* "as the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of the curriculum and to assess its effectiveness within the context of the particular institutions involved; indeed, the evaluation process should be a sort of ongoing needs assessment, but one based on considerably more and better information." Along this line of thought, Richards (2001:286) claims that once a curriculum is in place, a number of questions still need to be answered. Two of these suggested questions which are relevant to this study are the following: Is the curriculum achieving its goals, and are those affected by the curriculum (teachers, administrators, students, parents, employers) satisfied with the curriculum? Curriculum evaluation is concerned with answering these questions to find out if the program responds to learners' needs. Alderson and Beretta (1992:298) go a step further and differentiate between evaluation and research. They state that "evaluations are perhaps best distinguished from 'research' in that they are intended to serve practical ends, to inform decision makers as to appropriate courses of action, and, above all, to be *useful* and to be *used*."

At this point, it is also important to clarify the terms *program, program evaluation*, and *language education program*. Lynch (1996: 2) claims that a *program* "generally evokes the image of a series of courses linked with some common goal or end product," and Brown (1995:24) points out that *program evaluation* "might be defined as the ongoing process of information gathering, analysis, and synthesis, the entire purpose of which is to constantly improve each element of the curriculum on the basis of what is known about all of the other elements, separately as well as collectively." Lynch (1996: 2) states that a *language education program* "generally consists of a slate of courses designed to prepare students for some language-related endeavour. This might mean preparing students to pass a language proficiency exam that, in turn, would allow them to gain entrance to some other program." In the context of the present study, this implies preparing our students to function, in a general sense, within the context of a second language culture.

The University of Costa Rica has a large number of graduate programs, and the MA in TEFL is one of them. This program was created in 1998, and 98 students have graduated thus far. They are presently working as English teachers, program administrators, teacher trainers, as well as program coordinators, and at least one of them owns an ESP company. The MA in TEFL is a two-year program (60 credits), but most students complete it in three years. Seven required courses account for 48 credits: Second Language Acquisition, Issues in Applied Linguistics, Methods in Teaching English, Integration of Listening and Speaking, Integration of Reading and Writing, Course Design, and ESP Practicum. To complete the program, three electives (12 credits) are chosen from various areas such as the teaching of grammar, pronunciation, culture, vocabulary, educational psychology, English in its social context, technological resources, materials development, and curriculum. Applicants for this program must meet three requirements: a BA in English or any related field, a grade point average of 8, and a grade of 8 or above on an English exam that assesses speaking and writing skills. Although this program has been running successfully for over 10 years and has enjoyed recognition in Costa Rica and even abroad (with 12 international graduates), only one formal research study carried out by Bolaños (2006) has examined its effectiveness. Her study dealt with three research questions, of which two are relevant to the present study: How satisfied are students with what they learned in the program? What improvements need to be made to the program according to students' perceptions?

The results of Bolaños' study showed that there was high satisfaction with the program in general and that what students learned in the program had prepared them to compete in the job market. However, almost half of the respondents reported that the program did not provide them with enough tools to use technology for teaching English in their classes. Besides, the areas that showed the highest levels of satisfaction with the amount of learning were teaching methods, integration of listening and speaking skills, foreign language learning theories, and integration of reading and writing skills.

Regarding the improvements that the program needs, Bolaños concludes that the areas of technology for teaching, teaching of grammar and pronunciation, and assessment of language acquisition should all be strengthened and that the Practicum does not prepare students for their current jobs. To solve this problem, Bolaños offers some suggestions. First, she recommends designing a course that integrates grammar and pronunciation. The Master's Committee welcomed her proposal and has changed the contents of the course PF-0301 Issues in Applied Linguistics to include the teaching of grammar and pronunciation. This course has been offered two times already, and the students' evaluation results have shown a high degree of satisfaction with it. Second, in regard to technology, which is another weak area according to Bolaños, she recommends devoting part of the teaching methods course to address the issue of using technology to assist English classes, or even using technological tools in the other required courses. Third, she believes that the connection of the program to the Practicum and the Practicum to the students' jobs should be considered

by the MA Committee. To address this problem, she considers that the program should be modified "so that the skills and knowledge gained from the program prepare students better for the Practicum." (p.57) She also believes that if ESP is what our society currently needs to satisfy the demands of the job market, then the program should serve as a bridge between the employers in that specific field and the students in the program. (p.58)

Aguilar (2005) asserts that it is important to contribute to regulation processes and to create links between the programs and the institutional planning procedures by making evaluation part of the programs. Because the researcher fully agrees with this assertion and since evaluation is critical to the success of any educational program, this study seeks to determine whether MA graduates in TEFL are satisfied with the program or not. This article summarizes the graduates' opinions and beliefs about the effectiveness of the program; it also gives recommendations that will help establish a close connection between the program components and the existing needs of our society in terms of English teaching and learning. If this link is strong enough and long-standing, language needs in our society are likely to be fully satisfied.

Research questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Are graduates in the MA in TEFL at UCR satisfied with the knowledge acquired in the program?

2. What measures should be taken to improve the program?

METHOD

Subjects

The participants were 41 graduates aged 25 to 64 who completed the program in TEFL between the years 1999 and 2007. Twelve of them are international students; seven out of these 12 are working abroad: two in the United States, two in Taiwan, one in Venezuela, one in Panama, and one in Argentina. The other five international graduates are presently working in Costa Rica; one of them does not teach English but rather German, which is her L1. Most of the graduates teach English as a foreign language; interestingly, some teach other languages. For example, a Costa Rican teaches both English and German; one of the graduates in Taiwan teaches English and Chinese, and a Costa Rican graduate is teaching English as a second language in the United States. Some of the respondents have two jobs, and they hold different positions. The number of responses is given in parentheses: English instructors in public or private universities (28), high school / primary school teachers (7, and 3 are department coordinators), teacher trainers (3), curriculum coordinator (1),

director of administrative assistance (1), owner of an ESP company (1), German instructors (2), Chinese instructor (1), and Spanish as a foreign language instructor (1).

Procedure

To gather the data, all 92 graduates were sent a questionnaire (see Appendix) via email. Questionnaires were preferred over other kinds of instruments because "they are extremely effective tools for collecting career-specific information which is essential to develop the goals of the curriculum in order to keep the program focused on the needs of the community." (Diamond, 1998: 67) After two weeks, the return rate was still low, so the survey was sent again, but this time a kind reminder was added to increase return rate. This strategy proved effective because 41 questionnaires were returned. Obviously, a large sample size yields more reliable data, but this number is a representative sample because, according to Brown (2005), "statistics teachers often give the number 28 (or sometimes 30) as a rule of thumb for the minimum sample size to use per group or per variable in a research study."

This study was carried out following the logical stages for conducting of an evaluation as proposed by Alderson and Beretta (1992: 274-299): planning, implementing, interpreting, reporting, and using. In the planning stage, the author established the purpose of the study, the audience, the evaluator, the content, the method, and the instrument to be used in the study. In the implementation phase, the author dealt with a major factor in the development of an evaluation, which is the people involved. The main limitation here was the difficulty in personally contacting the graduates personally. For obvious reasons, it was impossible to gather all of them in the same place at the same time. Thus most of them were unavailable to the evaluation. Since the survey was sent via email, two strategies had to be devised to increase the respondents' willingness to complete and return the questionnaire. The first strategy, which is suggested by Dörnyei (2003), was to send the survey with a note emphasizing that the recipient's responses were *needed* and *valuable*, and the second one was to send the surveys again, but this time, each questionnaire included a personalized message and a sincere request to fill it out. In the third phase, interpreting, Alderson and Beretta (1992) stress the importance of reasonable interpretations and the need for multiple perspectives in program evaluation. Therefore, the evaluator requested that two colleagues analyze the data in order to have three different versions of the interpretation. The report on the evaluation, the fourth phase, is a crucial document; this is the product that people interested in the process will see. This reporting stage includes analysis of the data, recommendations, decisions to be made, and actions to be carried out in order to improve the program. Finally, in the last step of this process, the using stage, the report of this evaluation will be presented to the members of the M.A. in TEFL Committee, since they are the decision makers for the program, and they will take appropriate courses of action to use the evaluation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes the most frequent tasks the respondents carry out at work and how well the program prepared them for each one.

Table 1
Most frequent tasks graduates do at work and how
well the program prepared them for each task

Tasks	Frequency	How well the program prepared them for this task	R
Teach classes	Every day / week	3 or + 2 or 1	35 3
Plan courses	Once / twice a year	3 or +	18
Plan lessons	Every day / week	3 or +	15
Develop materials	Very often	5	11
Prepare /administer exams	Often	5	8
Coordinate a department	Every day	3	6
Teacher recruitment process	Every term	- 3	8
Train novice teachers	Often Every day	4 2	4 1
Observe classes	Very often	3	4
Evaluate textbooks	Twice a year Once a year	3 or + 2	3 1
Evaluate curriculum	Usually	1	2
Deal with administrative procedures in an academic department	Every day	1	1
Supervise practicum	Every other semester	1	1
Interview applicants to determine their language proficiency level	Often	4	1
Write academic articles	Often	3	1
Coordinate the Conversation Club	Once a week	3	1
Carry out placement tests	Every two months	2	1
Design course programs for business purposes	Every day	4	1

R= number of responses
1 = not at all 2 = not enough 3 = enough 4 = very well 5 = completely

As shown in Table 1, the most frequent tasks graduates carry out at work are teaching English classes and planning courses. Almost all the respondents consider that the program adequately prepared them to teach classes, and 18 of them think that they were well prepared to plan courses too, a task that they have to do once or twice a year. Similarly, 15 of them reported having good training to plan the lessons they have to teach every day or every week. Eleven graduates who had taken the elective course, Materials Development, reported that this course completely prepared them to develop materials. This fact is quite surprising because it means that all 11 respondents were very satisfied with the course. Eight people considered that they were prepared to design and administer tests, and six respondents think that the program also gave them enough knowledge to be able to coordinate English departments at their schools. In contrast, eight graduates felt that the program did not prepare them to select and hire personnel; however, four respondents stated that the program did prepare them to train novice teachers and observe their classes, and only one graduate reported doing this task on a regular basis, but not feeling well prepared for it. One person said that the program had given her enough knowledge to determine applicants' language proficiency levels, and another reported that the program had prepared her to head an ESP company. The data shown in this table indicate that there are some graduates doing tasks for which the program did not prepare them well, such as evaluating curriculum, dealing with administrative procedures in an academic department, supervising practicum, and carrying out placement tests.

Table 2 shows the measures taken by the graduates to face the challenges of not being prepared for a specific task assigned at work.

Table 2

Actions taken by graduates when they were assigned tasks for which they felt they were not prepared

Challenging task	Actions taken by graduates
Recruiting new teachers	Asking former coordinators /supervisors for help Using general knowledge gained in the program to make decisions Using the information and training provided in the program to establish parameters to choose the best candidates Reading and learning about new areas (distance education and hiring new personnel)
Coordinating a department	Studying educational administration Using the general training received to develop and use strategies to coordinate tasks with other colleagues
Planning new courses	Reading different books Consulting teachers who had taught the courses previously Asking colleagues for tips and help Using the Internet to get ideas and materials

Leading an ESP company	Looking for information about how a real ESP company works Asking other people who have started their own businesses
Training teachers	Using the general knowledge acquired from practicum supervisors Doing research on how to develop professionally Doing reflective teaching and giving feedback to trainees Having continuous training and supervision Attending tutorial sessions
Supervision of teaching	Studying the guidelines of the company and using EFL knowledge gained in the program to create tools for supervision

As shown in Table 2, the actions taken by the graduates indicate that the program prepared them in some ways to use strategies to face tasks that represented a challenge for them. Even though they did not receive instruction in those areas, they feel that the program did prepare them to use their initiative to look for solutions and perform those challenging tasks successfully. The general knowledge acquired in the program guided them to use strategies such as asking experts in the field for help and tips, attending training sessions, and looking for better materials and ideas to plan new courses. In other words, the insights about English teaching gained in the program helped them to develop strategies to overcome their weaknesses in those areas where no formal instruction was given because those areas did not comprise the core content of the program.

Table 3 indicates the amount of learning in each content area and its frequency of use at work.

The data shown in Table 3 indicate that the areas in which the graduates learned the most are those covered in the required courses. Needs analysis (NA), the practicum (P), foreign language learning theories (FLLT), and ESP teaching were mentioned by 30 or more respondents. Course design (CD), teaching methods (TM) integration of skills, and lesson planning (LP) appear in the range of 29 to 23. The areas of multiple intelligences (MI), materials development (MD), research methods (RM), educational psychology (EP), the teaching of grammar (TG), language assessment (LA) and linguistics obtained from 18 to 11 responses. The areas in which the respondents reported the least learning are curriculum design (C), the teaching of pronunciation (TP) and culture (TC), technology for teaching English (TTE) and administration of an English program (AP). However, since these last areas are all part of the content of the elective courses, they are also reported with the highest numbers of responses for Column NA, meaning that a large number of the respondents did not take those courses. A possible explanation for this is that during the last three years the program has offered only one elective course every semester due to budget constraints; thus the graduates had to register for the only "elective" offered. Besides, not all the electives are given on a regular basis; for example, the Administration of an English Program course has been offered only once, so it is not surprising that 19 people responded NA, and two other courses, the Teaching of Culture and Technology for Teaching English, have been offered only three times.

Table 3

Areas of study in the program, amount of learning, and frequency of use at work

	Area	Amount of learning					Frequency of use at work				
		0	1	2	3	NA	0	1	2	3	NA
NA	Needs analysis	0	1	4	35	1	4	9	11	14	3
P	The practicum	0	1	6	34	0	2	5	7	25	2
FLLT	Foreign language learning theories	0	0	6	33	2	3	13	9	13	3
ESP	ESP teaching	0	2	8	30	1	12	8	3	16	2
CD	Course design	0	4	8	29	0	6	5	11	17	2
TM	Teaching methods	0	0	11	29	1	0	4	11	24	2
ILS	Integration of listening and speaking	0	0	13	28	0	1	3	5	31	1
IRW	Integration of reading and writing	0	4	13	24	0	1	5	11	22	2
LP	Lesson planning	0	2	13	23	3	0	1	6	31	3
MI	Multiple intelligences	1	7	12	18	3	0	13	10	14	4
MD	Materials development	1	3	8	17	12	0	5	2	21	13
RM	Research methods in language teaching / learning	0	8	14	14	5	10	14	5	5	7
EP	Educational psychology	0	10	17	13	1	4	9	11	15	2
TG	The teaching of grammar	3	5	11	13	9	1	1	10	23	6
LA	Language assessment	0	9	14	13	5	0	3	6	28	4
LI	Linguistics (syntax, phonology…)	4	9	13	11	4	1	7	11	18	4
C	Curriculum design	2	7	10	9	13	6	6	6	11	12
TP	The teaching of pronunciation	5	5	11	9	11	0	2	11	19	9
TC	The teaching of culture	4	11	7	7	12	1	9	12	8	11
TTE	Technology for teaching English	7	9	3	5	17	1	4	12	9	15
AP	Administration of an English program	7	9	4	2	19	6	3	8	5	19

Amount of learning: 0 = nothing; 1 = a little; 2 = enough; 3 = more than enough; NA = not applicable / No answer

Frequency of use: 0 = never; 1 = sometimes; 2 = usually; 3 = always

The areas where the graduates reported the most learning are not necessarily the ones with the highest frequency of use at work, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Comparison between the amount of learning reported in each area and its frequency of use at work
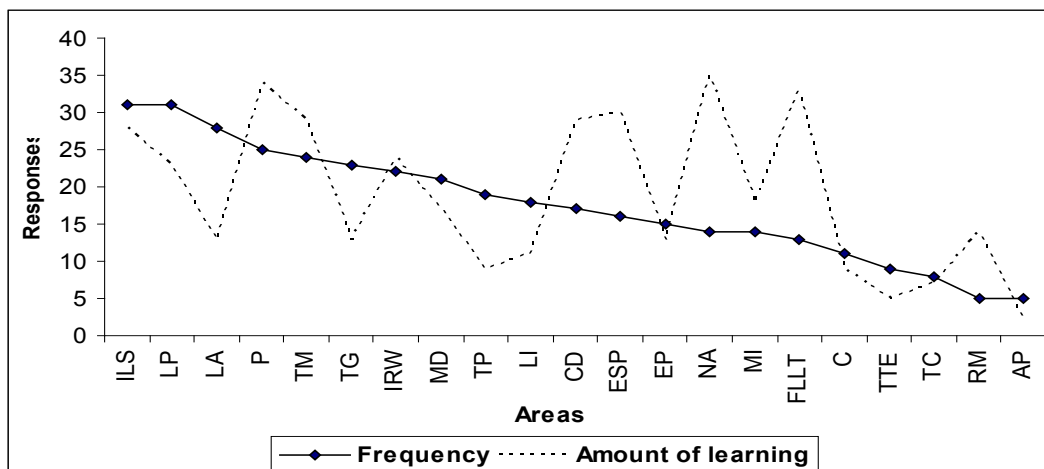

Figure 1 clearly highlights several problematic areas. (See Table 3 for abbreviations.) First, language assessment (LA) is a weak area because 28 of the graduates report that they always use it at work, but they feel that they did not acquire enough knowledge in this area while in the program. This finding implies that the program should reinforce this area because the most frequent task carried out at work is teaching classes, and assessment is essential to monitor student progress and goal achievement in any English class. The second deficient area is the teaching of grammar and pronunciation. The respondents report a lack of knowledge in these two areas, which most of them always need to use at work. This is easy to understand since teaching English necessarily involves dealing with grammatical structures and phonological issues. However, as pointed out before, the content of the required course, Issues in Applied Linguistics, was modified after Bolaños presented her findings, and now the main emphasis of this course is the integration of grammar and pronunciation in an English class. The third mismatch in terms of learning and frequency, but in an opposite direction, is the areas of needs analysis (NA) and ESP. For the purpose of this study, the author will only refer to them as ESP since needs analysis (determining the language and learning needs of the students) is the most characteristic feature of ESP design (Hutchinson and Waters, 2000). That is, it is impossible to talk about teaching an ESP course without first carrying out a needs analysis. The graduates reported significant learning in this area, but little frequency of use at work. This means that most

of the respondents are not teaching ESP courses because they are working at educational institutions and not in the business world where these types of courses are more common. The fourth area where we find a slight mismatch is course design and the practicum. Like in ESP, a larger number of graduates stated that they learned more than enough in these areas than the number of graduates who said that they always use them at work. This might mean that most of them do not have to design courses and that they are probably given the course syllabi when they are assigned new courses. Another explanation for this finding might be that since the practicum is ESP and what most of them teach is general English, some graduates may think that the materials, techniques and activities they used there cannot be used again in the future. In other words, they might mistakenly see this as a waste of resources and energy. The last problematic area is foreign language learning theories (FLLT). Almost all the graduates reported having learned a great deal, but only13 stated that they always use these theories at work. This finding is surprising because it tells us that many graduates have failed to see the relationship between theory and practice. Supposedly, all these theories will help teachers shape their beliefs about teaching and learning, and they constitute the source of teachers' behavior and actions in the class. Indeed, the more knowledgeable we are in foreign language teaching theories, the more efficient we will be as teachers because we will have better insight to make the right decisions in the teaching / learning process. Finally, the fact that most graduates report little use of the knowledge in the area of research methods is disappointing since a large number of graduates are presently working in public universities, and doing research should be one of their main duties to develop professionally, as explicitly stated by Harmer (1998: 243): "Teachers who do not investigate the efficacy of new methods and who do not actively seek their own personal and professional development may find the job of teaching becoming increasingly monotonous. Teachers who constantly seek to enrich their understanding of what learning is all about and what works well, on the other hand, will find the teaching of English constantly rewarding."

Table 4 presents a summary of the abilities, skills, and knowledge that students should have acquired by the time that they complete the program, as reported by the respondents.

Table 4
Knowledge, abilities, and skills that MA in TEFL students should have acquired by the time that they graduate and start looking for a job

Knowledge, abilities, and skills	R
Good teaching techniques /strategies	16
Using different teaching methods	14
How to teach an ESP course (ESP training)	14
Course design	12

Materials development	12
Using technology to enhance learning	12
Curriculum design	11
Second language acquisition theory	12
Effective lesson planning	11
Doing needs analyses	10
Integration of skills in their lessons	10
Assessment principles /skills	9
Theoretical background in linguistics	7
How to teach pronunciation	7
How to develop professionally	7
Implementation of multiple intelligences	6
Program administration	6
How to teach grammar	6
How to do research in the classroom	6
Management skills (leadership, decision-making skills)	6
Curriculum evaluation	5
Reflecting on their teaching practices and taking some action (Reflective practitioners)	5
Teaching students with special needs	6
Teacher training	5
Knowing how to motivate students to learn	5
Choosing the most appropriate authentic materials	4
Educational psychology	4
Effective class management tips	4
Dealing with cultural issues	4

Analyzing the above list of abilities and skills that students should have acquired before graduating, the author concludes that the MA in TEFL is developing most of them satisfactorily because 22 of these subject areas are included in the curriculum. However, some of the skills or abilities that obtained a large number of responses are the core content of elective courses, for example, materials development, using technology to enhance learning, curriculum design, and assessment principles and techniques. This could be considered a weakness because not all the graduates had the opportunity to take the courses in which these areas are emphasized.

The abilities that are not explicitly developed are program administration, management skills (leadership), and teaching students with special needs. The Administration of an English Program course, where students are provided with tools to become good leaders and managers, has been offered only once. The issue of students with special needs is covered in the Educational Psychology course. However, after analyzing Bolaños' suggestions in her study, there was a

modification in the MA curriculum. The ESP course was made mandatory, and Educational Psychology became an elective; as a consequence of this curricular change, not all the students enrolled in the program will take Educational Psychology. Some of them will not be able to take Administration of an English Program either because electives are not offered every year.

Table 5 shows the respondents' opinions about what the program should include to achieve its goals and serve the needs of the country regarding English teaching.

Table 5
Graduates' opinions about what should be done to improve the MA in TEFL to satisfy the needs of our society for more competent workers

Graduates' opinions to improve the program	R
A course in using technology to enhance foreign language teaching is a must.	9
The program should offer more courses on curriculum design.	7
Students need more training in ESP and exposure to more ESP scenarios before starting the practicum.	4
Teaching Grammar and Teaching Pronunciation should be required courses.	4
The program needs to integrate e-learning as a strong field of study because teaching and learning tendencies are changing rapidly, and we should be able to cope with those changes successfully.	3
The practicum could include some business or tourism entities, call centers and customer service so that the students can live the experience of working in this more complex area.	3
He program should focus on administration and management skills. (Most of the jobs offered to MA graduates have to do with the coordination of English departments in different institutions.)	3
The course Educational Psychology should provide future teachers with the necessary tools to be able to work with students who have learning disabilities; real-life cases should be analyzed and discussed in class.	2
It may be a positive experience to ask MA students to prepare workshops on a variety of areas to help MEP teachers with their weak areas and to acquire new knowledge on the most recent teaching techniques.	1
The program needs to include a course on how to become a teacher trainer and how to promote professional development.	1
The program should have two main areas with different courses: English teaching, and administration / creation of English programs. The first area should include courses which will provide the students with strategies to deal with students who have special needs (ADD or ADHD or some disabilities), and the second area should have courses such as course design, practicum and ESP.	1
An internship would be a valuable tool. Sometimes the practicum is not enough and going to a real company and observing a real work place might help the students design better courses.	1

The students should be given more opportunities to plan lessons, to write objectives, and to design activities before they begin the practicum.	1
Culture should be a basic component in the MA syllabus. Culture is now approached from different perspectives: business, medicine, law, and tourism.	1
The program should somehow prepare students to be leaders in a country that needs more quality and less quantity. A hands-on approach where students are provided with a variety of contexts (either artificial or real) and where they can apply the acquired knowledge /skills is advisable.	1

When the respondents were asked if they had had to decline a job because they had felt they were not prepared for it, 39 answered negatively. Only two answered affirmatively; however, the reasons given for declining the jobs are irrelevant to the main focus of the program. One of them said that the job required translation and simultaneous interpretation because of cultural issues. The other mentioned that one of the main requisites of the job she was offered was to have advanced computer skills, which she lacked. Obviously, translation and computer skills are not part of the content of this program. On the other hand, those who had never declined a job made reassuring remarks about the program. The following statements indicate that most graduates are satisfied with the knowledge gained in the program and that they have high expectations for the future:

- "In fact, I have had lots of interesting job offers after completing the program."
- "The MA program prepared me well for almost any kind of job related to English teaching at any level."
- "When I started this program, I never thought I would end up working in a curriculum-related position. Even though the program did not prepare me for my current position, to some extent the program did cover some curriculum and course design topics that made my transition from TEFL to an administration position smoother."
- "I accepted a job that deals with online tutoring, and I am still struggling with it because I have very little knowledge in this demanding and competitive field. However, I feel that the program prepared me to accept challenging tasks. "

Limitations of the study

A major limitation of this study lies in the fact that the surveys were not anonymous. Since the questionnaires were emailed, the author could clearly identify each sender, and obviously, the respondents were aware of this situation. This might have prevented the respondents from being completely frank. A second limitation was that some graduates did not understand some of the questions and, therefore, provided responses which were not relevant to this study.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study has sought to contribute to the improvement of an education program, specifically the MA in TEFL at UCR, by evaluating the graduates' degree of satisfaction with it and by reporting what the graduates perceive the program should teach its students to successfully meet the needs of the country. This study concludes that the graduates are highly satisfied with the knowledge acquired in the program. One fact that supports this conclusion is that 100% of the respondents reported that they would recommend the program to other people, and they even added reassuring remarks about it, such as the following:

- "This program has been the most significant and useful basis for having a successful performance in my job."
- "This program is very professional, well organized, complete, demanding, and according to reality."
- "This MA program gave me the confidence to face any challenge in my professional life."
- "I would definitely recommend this program to other people because of its high standards and its curriculum design."
- "I feel really thankful for having had the opportunity to study in this program where I learned a great deal about teaching and learning."
- "This program makes us highly competent for the job demands that the country has due to globalization and the coming of multinational companies."
- "I would highly recommend this program because it is a very enriching experience. Designing an ESP course and teaching it was worthwhile and absolutely valuable. These two tasks gave me the necessary tools to be a more efficient teacher."
- "Definitely. In all the courses, I learned important theories and skills that have helped me teach not only English but also Chinese as a foreign or second language, but most importantly, I learned to take the initiative in the teaching / learning process and to make informed decisions."
- "Choosing this prestigious program was the smartest decision I have ever made."

This study supports Bolaños' findings regarding student satisfaction with the program. In both studies, there is evidence that the graduates are highly satisfied with the program, that the knowledge gained in the required courses is also the knowledge they most frequently apply at work (teaching methods, integration of listening / speaking and reading / writing), that even though they learned a great deal in the course Professional Practicum course and in Course Design, they do not always implement that knowledge in their work tasks, and that the program did not provide them with enough tools to use technology in their English classes.

Regarding the measures that should be taken to improve the program, both groups of subjects suggested that a course on the use of technology for

teaching English be mandatory; they also expressed concern about their lack of techniques to teach grammar and pronunciation and about the gaps in their knowledge of curriculum design. The subjects in the present study recommend that the Materials Development course also be compulsory. Because of time constraints and university policies toward graduate programs, it is not possible to make all these elective courses mandatory; however, some of these topics could be covered in the other courses; for example, the use of technology to facilitate teaching and learning could be included in any course, and materials development could also be required in many of the projects that students usually carry out as part of evaluation procedures. As to grammar and pronunciation, both areas have been included in the required Issues in Applied Linguistics course in the last two years, and this same course will be offered again next year. This course was conceived as a space to discuss different issues, and in fact, the instructors have been changing the topics; some of the options offered were discourse analysis, multiple intelligences, learning styles, learner variables, and vocabulary teaching. Perhaps, it would be reasonable not to rotate the topics, and instead just maintain the grammar and pronunciation topics since the graduates report that these two areas are highly useful for their classes.

Furthermore, the findings of this study point to a need to create effective changes by enriching the content of some of the courses by including topics such as dealing with students with learning disabilities, administration and management skills, e-learning, culture from various perspectives, different ESP populations, and more opportunities for lesson planning. The author recommends that the issue of learning disabilities be studied in Educational Psychology and that e-learning be dealt with in the Technology to Enhance Teaching course or in English Teaching Methods. Another suggestion is to have students include lesson planning in at least one of the projects in each course. Besides, student teachers could easily do the practicum with different target populations such as business people, tour guides, and customer service staff if arrangements are made in advance and if these populations are willing to receive instruction on campus. Working with different target populations in the ESP practicum will be a very enriching experience for both the students and the instructors in charge of class supervision. Other topics such as administration of academic programs, management skills, and cultural issues could be covered in workshops, as suggested by one of the graduates: "It may be a positive experience to ask MA students to prepare workshops on a variety of areas to help those teachers working for the Ministry of Education improve their weak areas and learn the most recent teaching techniques." These workshops could have two goals: to help teachers in service and to train MA students in areas such as management, assessment, administration, cultural issues in the business world, and even lesson planning, an area which was mentioned as a need before students start their practicum.

The last conclusion drawn from this study deals with the graduates' ability to transfer their knowledge in TEFL to the teaching of other languages. As mentioned earlier, four graduates teach other languages: two teach German,

another one teaches Chinese, and the other teaches Spanish as a second language. These four teachers explicitly mentioned that the program had helped them become skillful at transferring those strategies and techniques useful in the teaching of English to the teaching of other languages. As one of the graduates accurately stated, "When I started this program, I did not know that it would be so easy to use the same strategies and activities that I used to teach English in my Spanish classes." These four cases support the fact that this program is far-reaching and multi-purpose.

Finally, the author would like to thank all the graduates who participated in this study for their valuable help. Their input has been very important to the MA in TEFL since it will not only improve the quality of this language education program but also enhance student learning.

Implications for further research

Since the success of a language education program depends on its constant evaluation, further research must be conducted in order to strive for academic excellence. The author recognizes that the narrow scope of this study leaves many questions unanswered regarding effectiveness: Are the students presently enrolled in the program completely satisfied with the courses, the instructors, and the teaching / learning process? Are our graduates' employers satisfied with the graduates' performance? Do employers consider that certain areas of the program need improvement to fully meet the needs of our society? Additional studies should examine these questions, and much more effort will be needed to obtain new insights regarding the MA in TEFL so that the University of Costa Rica may continue offering the country a highly successful language education program in the field of English teaching.

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APPENDIX
Survey Instrument

UNIVERSIDAD DE COSTA RICA
Posgrado en la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

Graduates' Degree of Satisfaction with the MA Program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

The purpose of this survey is to determine whether graduates of the MA Program in TEFL between the years 2000 and 2007 are satisfied with what they learned in the program. This survey will also provide insight as to the changes needed to meet the demands of the country for English language teaching. Thus, your input will be crucial to improve the effectiveness of the program. Thanks for your generous help!

    Mayra Solís
    Director of the Program

....
Age _____   Male _____   Female _____

I started the program in _____ (year) and finished it in _____ (year).
At present, I work at _____
I work as a /an _____
I have worked there for _____ (# of years / months)

I.   Complete the following table.
a)   In the first column, list the activities you perform as part of your job. (e. g. *teach classes, hire teachers, plan courses*)

b) In the second column, indicate how often you carry out these tasks (e.g. *every day, once a year, often*)

c)   In the third column, indicate how well the program has prepared you to engage in those tasks by rating each one from 1 to 5:

1= not at all   2= not enough   3= enough   4= very well   5 = completely

What tasks do you do at work?	How often?	How well did the program prepare you for this task?

If the MA Program did not prepare you for some /any of the above activities, what did you do in order to face this challenge?

II. Complete the following table.

a) In the first column, there is a list of areas of study in the program. In the second column, indicate how much you learned in the areas listed. Use the scale below.

Amount of learning

  0 = nothing / 1 = a little / 2 = enough / 3 = more than enough

b) In the third column, indicate how often you use this knowledge at work. Use the scale below.

Frequency of use at work

0 = never / 1 = sometimes / 2 = usually / 3 = always

c)   In the fourth column, check NA if you did not take any courses in that area.

Area	Amount of Learning	Frequency of Use at Work	NA
Foreign language learning theories			
Teaching methods			
Integration of listening and speaking			
Integration of reading and writing			
The teaching of culture			

The teaching of grammar			
The teaching of pronunciation			
Materials development			
Language assessment			
Multiple intelligences			
Lesson planning			
Educational psychology			
ESP teaching			
Curriculum design			
Technology for teaching English			
Administration of an English program			
Linguistics (syntax, phonology …)			
Research methods in language teaching-learning			
Course design			
The practicum			
Needs analysis			
OTHER AREAS:			

III. Answer the following questions.

1. What knowledge / abilities / skills should MA students in TEFL have acquired by the time that they graduate and start looking for a job?

2. What can be done to improve the MA Program in TEFL to satisfy the needs of our society for more competent workers?

3. Have you been offered a job which you liked but had to decline because you were not prepared for it? Please explain.

4. Would you recommend our program to someone else? Why or why not?

5. Please feel free to add any other pertinent comments that might help achieve the objective of this survey. Thanks again.